

# Pronunciation Myths and Facts

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Many students and teachers have myths about what it means to learn and teach the pronunciation of English. These are four most commonly held ones:

**Myth #1:** Learning the pronunciation of English means learning how to pronounce the individual vowel and consonant sounds.

**Myth #2:** It is difficult, if not impossible, for students to hear and pronounce some sounds, such as the difference between the vowel sound in ship and the vowel sound in sheep. Therefore, it is useless to spend time on pronunciation.

**Myth #3:** Pronunciation instruction is boring.

**Myth #4:** Nonnative speakers of English cannot teach pronunciation.

What are the facts?

**Fact #1:** There is much more to the pronunciation of English than its individual sounds. How these sounds are organized plays a greater role in communication than the sounds themselves. Two major organizing structures are rhythm and intonation.

*Rhythm.* The rhythm of English is created by the contrast in syllable lengths within words as well as across word boundaries. For example, in the word English, the first syllable Eng- is pronounced longer than the second syllable -lish. When we focus on the timing of syllables, we can see that the rhythm of the word English is identical to the rhythm of the words after and vision. Not only can words have identical rhythms but the rhythm of a word can be identical to the rhythm of a phrase; for example, festival and first of all. In fact, many novice learners of English have actually written festival when they heard first of all.

English speakers rely as much on rhythm to identify words as on the consonant and vowel sounds. Sometimes, they pay attention to the rhythm more than to the sounds. A San Francisco newspaper columnist reported that a student went to the library to ask for a copy of John Steinbeck's novel, *Of My Cement*. When we compare the rhythm of this mishearing to the rhythm of the actual title, *Of Mice and Men*, we can see that they are identical.

The lengthening of a syllable is conditioned by stress. In the word tumor the first syllable is stressed; therefore, it is longer than the second. Equally important as stressing a syllable is not stressing a syllable. If the second syllable of tumor is also stressed, and if the vowel of that syllable is incorrectly pronounced so that the syllable sounds like more, then a listener may hear the utterance as two words, as two more. When syllables are unstressed, the pronunciation of the vowel in that syllable sometimes changes. For example, notice what happens to the vowel in the second syllables of atom and atomic; to the second syllables in origin and original; and to the

third syllables in advantage and advantageous.<sup>1</sup> In each case the vowel in the unstressed syllable of the first member of each pair of words is pronounced differently from the vowel in the stressed syllable, even though the spelling is identical. It is not enough to know how a sound is pronounced, because its pronunciation can change when it occurs in different contexts.

*Intonation.* Intonation can be compared to a pointer. Instead of using a finger to do the pointing, however, speakers use their voices to draw attention to important words. Consider the following example:

Your papers should be typed and double-spaced. They should not be longer than five pages.

The underlined words are the ones that the speaker wants the listeners to pay attention to. In writing, we can show this emphasis by underlining words.<sup>2</sup> In speech, we use the pitch of our voices. In the example above, the speaker's voice would rise and then fall on each of the underlined words. The rises and falls in pitch when we speak are characteristics of INTONATION.

Where the rises and falls occur in a sentence determines the meaning of the sentence. Look at the following conversation:

Speaker A: I've lost the key.

Speaker B: Which key?

Speaker A: The key to the car.

Speaker B: The key to my car?

Speaker A: Sorry.

Notice that the change in pitch indicated by the underlined words moves from utterance to utterance to the word that conveys new information. Notice that articles and prepositions are not words where these pitch changes occur.<sup>3</sup> Personal pronouns are also words that are not normally highlighted in this way. In this conversation, however, my is highlighted to draw special attention to the owner of the car. Compare this example with the next one:

My sister lives in San Pedro Sula.

Hearing this sentence, a listener would assume that the speaker is responding to what someone else has said previously. For example, someone might have said:

My sister lives in Tegucigalpa.

In this opening sentence the highlighted word would be Tegucigalpa-my would not normally be highlighted or stressed. It is only when attention to the possessor is desired that the possessive pronoun is stressed.

Earlier, when we talked about the word tumor, we said that not stressing syllables was as important as stressing them. This is also true for words in sentences. Suppose you want to tell someone that it is all right to come along with you, and you say: You can come with us, stressing

the word can. The hearer might think you are saying you can't come with us. The reason for this possible misunderstanding is that the word can is pronounced differently when it is stressed from when it is unstressed. When it is unstressed, it sounds something like "kun" or "kin" (/k@n/). When it is stressed, it sounds like the synonym for a metal container (/k{n/). The pronunciation of the negative contraction can't is almost identical to the stressed form of can. Thus, a listener who does not expect can to be stressed but hears the vowel of the stressed word is likely to understand it as can't.

**Fact #2:** Pronunciation is an integral part of language learning. The abandonment of pronunciation instruction has been based on the mistaken belief that pronunciation means only sounds, and on the failure of such a limited focus to affect learners' overall pronunciation. As I have tried to show here, the scope of pronunciation is much broader than an inventory and description of sounds. It embraces the elements of rhythm and intonation, which function in the communication process. Thus, any learner with a goal of learning English for communicative purposes needs to learn the rhythm and intonation of English. The importance of pronunciation takes on even greater significance when we understand the connection between pronunciation and other aspects of language use.

*Pronunciation and listening comprehension.* As listeners expect spoken English to follow certain patterns of rhythm and intonation, speakers need to employ these patterns to communicate effectively. Similarly, listeners need to know how speech is organized and what patterns of intonation mean in order to interpret speech accurately. Thus, learning about pronunciation develops learners' abilities to comprehend spoken English.

*Pronunciation and spelling.* Learning about pronunciation also helps learners with the spelling system of English. Novice learners expect to find a one-to-one correspondence between a sound and its spelling. However, the letter a, for example, can be pronounced five different ways, as these words demonstrate: same, sat, father, call, and about. Often, a speaker's difficulties with pronunciation originate from a misinterpretation of the spelling system, rather than difficulty with the pronunciation of the sounds. A learner who expects the letter o to be pronounced like the word oh will be surprised to find that it is not pronounced that way in words like love, color, and production.

*Pronunciation and grammar.* Pronunciation can convey grammatical information. Consider the following two sentences:

- a. I'm sorry. You can't come with us.
- b. I'm sorry you can't come with us.

The difference between (a) and (b) can be seen in writing by noting the punctuation and capitalization, but how can this difference be shown in speech? What punctuation and capitalization do in writing, rhythm and intonation do in speech. In (a), a rise and fall in pitch on sorry followed by a pause perform the same function as a period. This tells the listener that I'm sorry constitutes one idea. A rise and fall on come indicates that the next set of words constitutes a second idea. In (b), only one rise and fall on come indicates that there is only one idea in this

group of words, that is, I'm sorry that you can't come with us. This example shows how rhythm and intonation can perform grammatical functions.

*Pronunciation and reading.* A lack of knowledge of pronunciation can even affect reading. Consider the following two examples. First, in a reading text about ranchers, a student understood the word to refer to people who took care of the forests, that is, rangers. Here, the mispronunciation of two sounds led to the misidentification of a word. Second, in a cartoon depicting a half-dozen cavemen carrying clubs, there was the following caption: "Why don't we start a club club?" To understand the humor of this cartoon, many people have to say the line out loud, that is, listen to how it sounds to get to the meaning, because visually the duplication of the word club can be misleading. Moreover, if you stress the second club, the line makes no sense. The stress has to fall on the first club, which is where stress falls on compound nouns. (A club club would be a club for people who own clubs.)

Pronunciation, then, is not only important for oral communication, but it is closely linked with listening comprehension, spelling, grammar, and reading. To ignore pronunciation is to ignore important information that can support these other skills.

**Fact #3:** Pronunciation teaching is not intrinsically boring. Perhaps pronunciation teaching has been boring because it has been done in a boring way. However, pronunciation teaching is not by nature boring. Teaching that does not involve the students' intelligence is boring. Teaching that employs material that is irrelevant to the students is boring. Practice that is monotonous and unvaried is boring. A teacher who believes pronunciation teaching is boring is boring.

**Fact #4:** Nonnative speakers of English can teach pronunciation. Much of the concern about teaching pronunciation has centered around the exact pronunciation of vowel and consonant sounds. However, if the goal of teaching learners is to enable them to communicate in English, we can see that communicative effectiveness depends not only on the pronunciation of these vowel and consonant sounds but on being intelligible speakers. Being able to use the rhythm and intonation of English will enable speakers to be much more intelligible than being able to pronounce vowels and consonants perfectly. While it is not unusual for teachers who are not native speakers of English to feel apprehensive about teaching pronunciation, this apprehension can be diminished and eliminated. Becoming educated about teaching pronunciation in its broader scope can make a big difference in a teacher's feeling of confidence. In addition, nonnative speakers of English typically have an advantage over native speakers in that they can learn to perceive and manipulate rhythm and intonation more easily than native speakers, for whom these are unconscious features.

These four myths about teaching pronunciation have contributed to its general neglect in contemporary language pedagogy. In view of the fact that information about pronunciation supports not only oral-language development but the ability to interpret speech as well as the skills of reading and writing, pronunciation cannot be considered tangential to language learning; it should be treated as an integral part of the entire process. What many teachers have dreaded about pronunciation has been the undue attention to sounds. By attending to the broader features of pronunciation, which have a more immediate, discernible effect on communication, teachers will find that teaching pronunciation will be a much more successful and satisfying experience.

